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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006953

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THAI REACT TO "SECRET PRISONS" ARTICLE: WILL THAKSIN SUE THE WASHINGTON POST?

REF: WEYER-COLE EMAIL 11/3/05

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON reason 1.4 (b) (d)

11. (C) Summary: The Thai government has issued heated denials of the Washington Post report of a secret CIA-run prison here, and has sought embassy assistance in responding to the accusations. After a local newspaper identified our VOA facility in northeast Thailand as the site of the prison, the facility acquiesced to the request of the district governor there, and permitted his representative to bring in a camera crew to visit the site, ostensibly to preview it for the governor's visit next week. The Prime Minister's press spokesman also made inquiries with us about the VOA facility, and told the press that the governor would bring journalists with him during his visit next week. According to an MFA official, the government is considering whether they should sue the Washington Post. We think that a lawsuit is unlikely. end summary.

12. (C) The Thai government has reacted strongly to the Washington Post report of a secret CIA-run prison in Thailand. MFA contacted us on Wednesday, as soon as they had seen the report, seeking our assistance in denying the allegation. Post provided MFA with the department guidance (in which the spokesman noted that he was "not in a position to confirm anything" and stated that questions "are best addressed to the CIA or DNI." - ref email.).

FOCUS ON VOA FACILITY

13. (C) The Thai and English language press continue to highlight the story. Of greatest concern, one newspaper reported that the secret facility was housed on the grounds of the VOA facility in Udon Thani, in northeastern Thailand. (Comment: this facility has been the target of many unfounded rumors in the past, including the allegation that it was the site of a secret airfield or clandestine military base. end comment.) American officials at the facility reported on Friday 11/4 that they had received urgent inquiries from local officials in Udon requesting further information about the activities on the site. This culminated in a request from the district governor to visit the facility early next week. Simultaneously, the Prime Minister's press spokesman contacted the embassy and the VOA office and also asked for further information about the activities on the site, preparatory to his press conference later in the afternoon. In each case, US officials noted that the VOA site had regularly welcomed visitors from the Thai government and public, and had no objection to continuing to do so. In fact, VOA had extended an invitation to the district governor asking him to come and see the facilities some time ago.

14. (C) On Friday afternoon, the district governor sent the provincial public affairs officer and a camera crew from his office out to the facility, saying that he would like to see video of the installation before his visit on Tuesday. VOA decided to admit this group, since they had come directly from the district governor, but did not admit any of the other reporters who had requested entry. The crew was given a tour, but no interviews. The Prime Minister's spokesman contacted embassy PAO after his press conference and told him that the press now had a better understanding of the situation. According to news reports, the spokesman announced that the district governor would visit next week, and that press was welcome to accompany him.

15. (C) Note: RSO has been in touch with the facility to consult on security in light of the press and public attention. end note.

Sue the Washington Post?

16. (C) Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and other high ranking officials continue to issue heated denials of the story. The MFA announced that it would coordinate with the US through the embassy to undertake an investigation into the news report. MFA Permanent Secretary Krit Garnjana-Gooncharn called Ambassador today and noted that some officials were considering whether the RTG should sue the Washington Post. (Opposition party leaders had baited the PM in the press today, saying that the government would be criticized if it

sued Thai papers for allegedly inaccurate stories, but ignored false reports in the US press.)

Comment

17. (C) News stories tend to flare up fast and die here, as the press moves on to the next scandal. However, the extent of the attention, and especially the focus on the VOA facility, is extremely unfortunate. The opposition sees this as a good way to attack the PM and will look for ways to keep the story alive. We believe that being open where we can -- e.g. possibly allowing limited press to accompany the governor when he visits the facility next week -- might be one reasonably effective way to tamp down the story. Efforts to conceal or keep the press out will only make the facility more interesting to them. But there is a downside to being overly accommodating, and at some point we may need to draw the line and say enough is enough. As for the threatened lawsuit, our guess is that Thaksin and the RTG will not follow through and initiate legal action against the Washington Post. But Thaksin can be unpredictable, especially if he feels pressured by the opposition and Thai media. end comment.
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